Lovely, dark and deep

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Lovely, dark and deep

by BumblebeesAndDandelions

Summary

He’d gone too far into the woods. He’d been desperate, an empty pantry and an emptier stomach driving him out into the snow with only an old rifle to look for anything, anything, he could eat. That had been hours ago.

Notes

June 4 - | Delirium | Hypothermia |

He’d gone too far into the woods. It was cold, the coldest winter they’d had in decades, since Will could remember, and the animals had fled from it, making hunting scarce. They’d been the closest things to companions he’d had this fall, and he missed their simplistic company. The easy companionship of prey and well fed predators existing in harmony. The winter had stolen that away, the animals disappearing hours before the first storm hit, months ago. He’d been desperate, an empty pantry and an emptier stomach driving him out into the snow with only an old rifle to look for anything, anything, he could eat. That had been hours ago.

The sun had disappeared far before it should have, blocked out by an unexpected storm. It roared down from the mountains, erasing his footsteps in the snow and making it impossible to see more than a foot in front of his face. It brought a sense of smallness to the world, shrunk it down to the deafening wind and the burn of frost creeping over his fingertips and face.

There was no food to be hunted out here, it had been a fool’s hope to even try. The wind whipped through the trees, sharp and cruel, biting at his face and hands. It was growing impossibly colder, even as he tried in vain to find his way back. The blue gray of the storm felt dreamlike, the sharp pain of the cold and snow fighting the idea.

He was glad, in a bitter sort of way, that he’d lost his only dog to old age last summer. There was nothing depending on him returning alive, nothing that would suffer when he died out here, in the cold.

He’d made it to a thicket of trees, grown tight enough to block some of the wind, and huddled down in the depression in the snow created in between their trunks. The shivers wracking his body had stopped, and now he was almost warm. He knew what that meant, and knew there was nothing he could do. He would die, and he’d be lucky if anyone traveled this far to find his body. More likely, it would be picked apart by the animals, bones scattered on the forest floor and buried under next year's snow.

Forgotten.

There was a peace to that. He’d been out here long enough he felt more kinship to the wild things of the forest than he did anyone from the village. He would have a use, at least, to those beasts. It would be easy to sink into that warmness, that endless cycle of existence. He’d wanted, at some point, before coming here, to do more. To live, and help, and save.

The warmth was a siren call, begging him to drown in its depth.

Something moved in front of him, and for a wild moment, his exhausted, frozen brain was convinced it was a person, rescuing him. He tried calling out to them, managing a pained croak through frozen lips, barely audible even to him.

The thing came closer, and Will felt a wave of despair pass over him, stronger then before for the hope that had worked its way inside him. It wasn’t a person at all, but a deer. It came closer, serene in the face of the storm, and he realized he must be hallucinating. He knew this deer. It was black, and massive, and staring calmly at him with its dark eyes, head crowned

with massive, regal antlers. He'd seen it before, only when he was at his worst. Exhausted, sick, lost in grief over his dog. A faraway comfort, watching from the edges of his vision.

It was beautiful, and if this was the thing welcoming Will to the next life, he was grateful.

It walked closer to him, kneeling in the snow beside him. Then he blinked, and it wasn't a deer, but a man crouched beside him, with high cheekbones and deep red eyes. He wasn't real either, cloaked in the feathered pelt of the deer.

"Hello, little trespasser. What brings you to my forest in this storm?"

The words hurt, feeling too big for Will to understand, not because of their size but because of the man who'd spoken them, imbued them with gravity and power. He felt slow, struggling to process them. Why was he here? Why would he come here?

"H- hun- ting. Hunting. Sir." He forced out, jaw locked against the cold. Manners beaten into him decades ago came out on instinct. The man seemed very put together, it was probably polite to call him 'sir'. Wouldn't want to be rude.

"Got lost," he added, as if that would explain everything.

The man looked at him, and Will felt himself being weighed, judged, under his gaze. It was uncomfortable, and Will would much rather the deer return. He told the man so, and the man chuckled, smiling indulgently at Will.

The man agreed, and he was gone, and the deer was back. Will laughed, bright and happy and delirious, a child watching a magic trick.

The deer snorted at him, and Will would have sworn it was laughing at him. It swung its head gently, gesturing vaguely towards its back. In the way of dreams, he knew he was supposed to climb on, so he did, forcing his burning, frozen limbs to move jerkily, grabbing handfuls of the scruff on the deer's neck to pull himself up. There were feathers mixed into the fur, growing alongside them. Will felt their silky edges with wide eyed wonderment, so taken with them that he nearly toppled off when the deer started moving.

He clung to the deer's back, frozen hands buried in the feathers and fur, as it raced through the snow, bounding like it was running atop the feet of snow instead of through it.

It felt like the deer ran for hours, the landscape and storm blurring around them. Will forced himself to stay awake, knowing with the bone deep certainty of all things mortal that if he fell asleep, if he allowed himself to rest, he'd never wake again.

Finally, it slowed, and they were in a place with air so warm it burned his skin. Will's eyes felt like they had frozen shut, but it was brighter here too, burning through his eyelids. Without the threat of the deer's speed to keep him awake, he felt himself losing his grip on consciousness. He slid off the deer to the ground, and the last thing he felt before he was gone was careful hands steadying him, carrying him away.

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